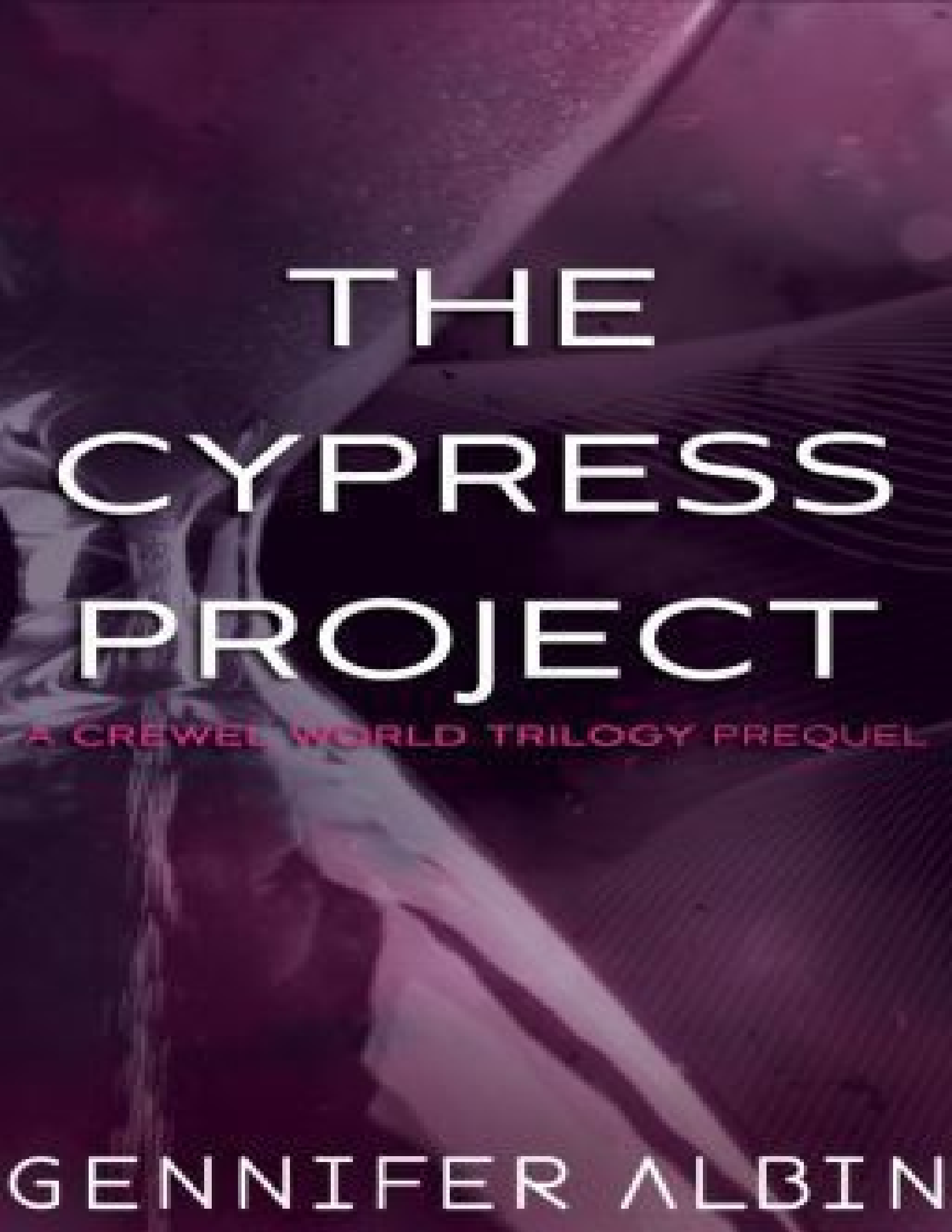
THE
CYPRESS
PROJECT
A CREWEL WORLD TRILOGY PREQUEL
GENNIFER ALBIN

The Cypress Project

Marion, Illinois

The air was heave and thick, drawing beads of sweat from Lucy's forehead and neck as she fought against her victory garden. Weeds choked the turnips and she tore them, determined not to lose a single precious plant. She and mother were terrible gardeners, but if there was going to be enough food on the table for the two if them, they would have to make it work.

Lucy's heart sped up as a figure came into focus. She didn't dare look past the crisp ironed slacks and recently shined boots, both standard military issue, even as the messenger knocked on her front door.

She hesitated, remaining hidden among the tomato vines. Whatever news the man had brought couldn't be undone by ignoring him. There was nothing for it but to be bold. Lucy pushed to her feet, wiping her dirty palms against the jeans she'd stolen from Nicholas's room and brushing loose hair back under the handkerchief wrapped around her head.

"Hello," she called out.

"Mrs. Price?" the messenger asked.

She nodded, He wanted her mother, but she wouldn't be home from her shift at the munitions factory for hours. He would probably give her the message anyway, but if he wouldn't she'd never sleep tonight, waiting for him to return. Not with both her father and brother at the front.

"I have a telegram for you." It took the messenger an eternity to cross the yard and hand her the small yellow telegram. A wisp of paper that could shatter the fragile normality she clung to. She shoved it into her pocket. It would be better to open it inside.

"I'm very sorry," the man said, the words as clipped and precise as his sharp-turn toward the sidewalk.

Lucy had never counted the steps from the lawn to the front door before, but she counted them now, willing herself to breathe with each one.

One.

Two.

Three.

Twenty-five steps until her fingers found the doorknob and she crumpled against the foyer wall, away from the eyes of her neighbors.

New Haven, Connecticut

Two gold initials were embossed on the leather suitcase: J.O. The letters mocked him reminding him how impractical and flashy his father's gift was, as he made his way through the crowds of soldiers at Union Station. New Haven was a waypoint for most –some heading off to the front, others to training, but no one was headed home. This was the only similarity between the men in uniform and Joshua O'Donnell. They were all strangers headed off to what had been sold to them as an adventure.

Joshua didn't believe Yale University would be an adventure though.

He gripped the handle of his case tightly, focusing his attention on the doors to the station and trying hard not to look at the men surrounding him. Men who were going to glory or death while he was forced to go to college. Joshua wasn't sure how his father had secured a 4-F for his file, but he was sure he'd paid handsomely for it. There was absolutely nothing wrong with Joshua and being handed a 4-F

slip had stung. The army doctor hadn't been able to meet his eyes.

Joshua felt the shame as though it had been embossed in gold letters on his forehead.

A soldier knocked into him. "Watch it, daisy."

"My apologies," Joshua said, his jaw clenched.

"We're going off to fight for our country here," the soldier continued. His eyes traveled up and down taking in Joshua's tweed jacket and shined shoes, and a sneer twisted across his lips.

"I'll pray for your safe return," Joshua said as he backed away. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to deck the soldier. In fact, the only thing holding him back was that the soldier was right.

That man deserved Joshua's respect, but Joshua didn't deserve his.

Outside the station, Joshua leaned against the brick façade and inhaled the fresh air. Setting down his suitcase, he pulled a folded letter from his pocket. The paper was thin and worn from the number of times he'd read it over the last two months. Opening it, he read it again and noted the address. Joshua O'Donnell would go to Yale as his father demanded, but he would serve his country as well.

Los Angeles, California

A hostess beckoned for Harold Patton to follow her through the crowded restaurant. The Polo Lounge remained one of the few places that felt normal in spite of the war. Harold nodded at Spencer Tracy, who was dining with a collection of his fellow polo players. The number of starlets in the room would have turned most men's heads, but Harold was preoccupied. The only thing he noticed, to his dissatisfaction, was how many women had dared to wear slacks. First the Lounge had given in to Marlene Dietrich and now the entire Beverly Hills Hotel had given in to the modern sensibility. It was an unpleasant reminder that with, so many men at war, there were fewer people around to keep women in their place.

"Mr. Patton." The hostess motioned toward his table. Two men wearing cheap suits were waiting in the green high-backed booth.

"I'll have an old-fashioned," Harold said to the girl as she turned to leave.

Harold settled into the booth, taking each man's hand as it was proffered.

"Dick Morton, and this is my colleague Walt Fitch."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Harold said, although he wasn't entirely sure this was the case.

"You're probably wondering why the War Department asked you to lunch—"

Dick began, but Harold cut him off with a wave of the hand.

"I assume you want something from me," Harold said.

“Well, yes.” Dick shifted uncomfortably in his seat and tugged at his dime-store tie.

Walt jumped in: “But it’s probably not what you think.” He was younger than Dick, which meant his suit was even cheaper, but there was no hesitation in his words. He believed in his ability to land Harold’s support.

“I’m a railroad man,” Harold said, “so either you’re after that or you’re after my collection of Baroque paintings. I doubt the War Department has a need for Rembrandt.”

“Actually, it’s neither of those things,” Walt said. He leaned in, dropping his voice as a waitress placed Harold’s old-fashioned in front of him. “We want you to invest in a project.”

“So you’re after my money? How refreshingly honest of you.” Harold took a long swig of his drink, studying his companions. Dick’s tie had been loosened to hang around his neck like a noose and his eyes darted around the room. If Dick had been an ambitious man, he might have enjoyed lunch at the Polo Lounge, but it was clear being here unnerved him. Walt’s eyes glowed, on the other hand. He didn’t merely seem at ease, he appeared to feed off the energy in the room. Either he was very invested in what he was selling or he was too young to know that lunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel was likely to be a singular event in his life.

“I think you’ll like what we have to offer,” Walt said.

“Which is?” Harold asked.

“An end to the war.”

“I know this is an unpopular opinion, Mr. Fitch, but I’m not eager to see the war come to an end. It’s been very good for the Patton Railroad Company.” Harold understood this would end the conversation and he would end up paying for the drinks the men abandoned when they took their leave of the unpatriotic fellow, as they’d be sure to call him.

Dick stood up, bowing slightly. “Mr. Patton, thank you for—”

“Sit down, Dick,” Walt ordered. “We haven’t explained to Mr. Patton what’s in it for him yet.”

Harold cocked an eyebrow as he raised his old-fashioned to his lips.

“You have money, Mr. Patton, but what about power?” Walt asked.

“Money is power, son.”

“It won’t be for much longer.” Walt leaned back against the booth to let this settle in.

Harold’s black eyes narrowed, looking for a tell in Walt’s demeanor. He was sure the kid was bluffing him, but Harold couldn’t help but respect him a little. “So you’re going to win the war? How?”

Walt’s mouth twitched into a smile. “The Cypress Project.”

Chapter 2

They buried an empty coffin in the Marion Cemetery. The military sent them a medal and some unposted letters Nicholas had had on him when he died in a muddy field in France. It was all they had left of Lucy's older brother, and it was more than most of the other families in town had received. For many there had been only the telegram and the awkward apology of the army messenger.

Two months had passed, school had started, but like many of the other girls Lucy didn't return. Learning about literature and geometry seemed increasingly pointless, and Mrs. Price hadn't raised a fuss when Lucy announced she had better ways to spend her time. Her mother's only requirement was that she didn't spend that time driving up to the Mattoon canteen to send off the young soldiers. More than one of Lucy's friends had found herself in a precarious situation following the deployment of a lover. A few had even come home married to boys they barely knew. But her mother didn't have to worry, those girls had been caught up in the romance of war, falling for the propaganda posters plastered throughout town. Those girls didn't dream of their brother's blood mixing with wet dirt and ash in a muddy field in France.

The weather would change soon, and Lucy canned the vegetables from the miserable victory garden. *Victory Garden* even the name now cut like a well-timed insult. The war would end as all wars must, she realized, as she stewed tomatoes over the stovetop, but there would be no victory for the Price family. Her father would almost certainly come home soon. He'd telegrammed that his commanding officer had learned of Nicholas's death. The family would be complete then, as complete as it ever would be again. But like so many who returned from the war with legs and armsamputated, the ghost of what they'd lost would linger over the Prices forever.

A knock at the door startled her from her black mood, but she frowned as she answered it to find a salesman on the porch.

"No, thank you," she said.

The man caught the door, barring her from closing it. "Miss Lucy Price?"

Lucy took a step back, uncertain what to do.

“My name is Mr. Watson. I’m from the War Department—”“

“Do you have news about my father?” Lucy asked.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I do not. I’d like to speak with you though.”

Lucy’s hand fluttered to her chest, the motion asking the question that had stalled on her tongue. *Me?*

“May I come in?” he asked.

She couldn’t think of a reason to say no to the War Department and besides, a strange sensation was creeping through the haze of grief engulfing her. Lucy had felt nothing but darkness since the day of the telegram, but now something else flickered into her chest.

Curiosity.

Lucy showed the man to the sitting room, whipping off her homemade apron when Mr. Watson’s back was to her.

“Can I get you some tea?” she asked. It was all they had in the house except stewed tomatoes. Neither Lucy nor her mother had much of an appetite these days.

“I’m fine,” Mr. Watson assured her. “I won’t take too much of your time.”

She nodded as she sank into a chair across from him. For some reason, she was relieved her mother wasn’t there.

“The War Department is looking for young girls like yourself to help with the war effort,” he said.

This time the question leaped from her lips. “Me?”

“Is it really that shocking? Our mothers and young women are running our factories. Our fathers and brothers are fighting,” he said.

Girls in Europe worked as nurses on the front. Lucy was too young to enlist as a nurse yet, but she planned to in a year and a half when she was of age. She’d hoped once that the war would be over by then, but now she knew it would never end. It would stretch on until there was no one left, until it wiped out the entire world. The realization colored her thoughts black with hopelessness, making her feel even more useless than when most of her victory garden had died after Nicholas’s death.

It was time girls did something more than blow kisses to passing soldiers or dance with them at the USO or show them one last good time in the backseat of their daddy’s Ford. Lucy knew that, but it didn’t make her any less afraid of the strange man. “What would I be doing?”

“You’d be ending the war,” Mr. Watson said.

“No one can end this war,” Lucy said before she thought better of it.

“This is a war between good and evil, Mr. Watson. It never ends.”

Mr. Watson opened his mouth, but then paused, his eyes trained on her.

Finally he reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew a business card, which he handed to her. “If you change your mind about that, you can reach me here. I’m on my way to Chicago this evening.”

Lucy nodded, unable to speak, her mouth full of cotton and doubt. She showed Mr. Watson to the door. Then she made her way into the kitchen where she dropped the card into the garbage, but as it fluttered onto a discarded eggshell, Lucy spied: *The Drake Hotel*.

Lucy's mother didn't speak at dinner. Lucy hadn't been counting but she was fairly certain less than fifty words had passed between the two of them this week. It had been that way since Nicholas died. Nothing had happened between them. Rather, neither felt like talking. They'd tried at first, forcing empty conversations about rations and small-town gossip, and then they'd given up, lapsing into a perpetual silence. The house was quiet as death, which felt appropriate, and the words they shared were utilitarian. There was always a point to them.

Everywhere Lucy went in town there were signs urging citizens to do this and that to help the war effort. At the picture show they talked about war bonds and beating Hitler, and then played films about young men going off to become heroes. At church they prayed for an end to the war and read the names of the boys going to the front, asking for the heavens to watch over them, but God didn't seem to be listening. It was all hollow. Death had become routine. Sending boys to be slaughtered was simply a regular sacrifice. And the words on the posters and the film reels and in the mouth of her minister were hollow. They did nothing to calm the ragged anger that burned in her chest. They didn't fill the void carved from her belly by sadness.

So she stopped listening and then she stopped talking. They both did.

But words never left her mind, especially since Mr. Watson's visit, and now they were lining up to become questions that marched through her thoughts so swiftly she couldn't latch on to one long enough to find the answer. It left her temples throbbing and now, at dinner, she speared a turnip, holding it up for examination but not eating it, while the deluge of questions continued. Lucy set the fork back down and slumped against the table.

Mrs. Price watched her, but didn't say a word. Instead she rose and took her plate to the sink to be washed. It was then that Lucy realized how lonely it was to be stuck in one's own head. More questions joined the long marching line: Who had stopped talking first? Was it her or her mother? Followed by a perhaps more important one: When would they start talking again?

It wasn't until Lucy's head dropped to her pillow that night that she asked herself the question that would change her life: Why had a man from Chicago come five hours to speak to *her*?

Chapter 3

Two days later, Lucy dropped a note for her mother on the kitchen table and then boarded a train to Chicago. She 'hadn't called ahead and when she pushed through the rotating doors to the Drake Hotel and stepped into the opulent lobby she wondered if she'd made a mistake. She stood there on the marble floor, lost in the *click-clack* of dress shoes and marveled at the number of people. Chicago felt alive in a way that Marion, Illinois, hadn't since the U.S. had joined the war. Perhaps she could lose herself here, become a new person, and forget all the pain she'd left behind when she got on that train. It wasn't too late. She could walk back out to the busy Chicago sidewalk and disappear, but then she'd never get her answers.

Watson hadn't told her what they wanted her to do or why, but she couldn't stand the nagging questions circling in her brain any longer.

She needed to know why he'd come for her. She needed to know why he thought they could end the war.

And why they hadn't done so months ago, before Nicholas was killed.

But most of all she needed to believe that good could still triumph over evil. Lucy supposed that was liking wishing for a fairytale; but she knew there would be no happy ending.

Chapter 4

Harold skimmed the file in front of him, paying no attention to the girl in the chair across from him. He didn't notice how she clutched the locket at her neck or how her eyes darted birdlike around the room. If he had, he might have discovered the girl was nervous, but he probably wouldn't have cared. Harold Patton wasn't in the business of sixteen-year-old girls. At least, he wasn't until recently. Somehow that bastard Walt Fitch had talked him into this little program the War Department needed to have financed, and because of the exorbitant amount of money the leeches had gotten out of him, Harold had insisted on being present for the process. Personally Harold thought these scientists were insane, but they had the backing of the U.S. government, which meant that they had more than a theory. There was no way the War Department would have sanctioned such a ridiculous program, especially during wartime, without evidence that it could succeed.

He wanted to see that evidence for himself. If they could pull off what they'd proposed to him, Harold wanted in on the ground floor.

But he also wanted to know how it would work. When he was fifteen his father had sent him out to help lay a new track for the railroad. Harold had hated him for it at the time, but because of that experience he understood what business he was in, which meant nobody could pull one over on him. It had also provided him with near limitless power within his own company. Power that could only grow—if he understood the implications of this little project Fitch had pitched him.

But that didn't make him interested in the girl.

She cleared her throat and he looked up, dropping the file on the table.

"Mr. Watson thinks I would be a good candidate," she told him.

He had to hand it to Watson. At least all the girls the man had recruited for the trials were lookers. This girl—Lucy, according to her file—could have been in pictures in a few more years with her wavy blond hair and fair skin. Right now she looked too young, too innocent, for Hollywood. That was the other thing Watson had a knack for—picking the gullible ones who believed it was their duty to help the poor boys overseas. Of course, Watson was working from a list of the survivors of those recently killed in action, so maybe he wasn't all that brilliant, but at least he brought back pretty girls.

Faces like hers would sell this program to every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the country. People wouldn't bat an eye at putting their fate in the hands of a sweet young girl from—he glanced at the file again—Illinois. It would make the transition simpler—for everyone.

"I think Mr. Watson is right," Harold said. He flashed her a brilliant smile as a young man entered the room. Harold's eyes flicked from Joshua to Lucy, waiting for a reaction from either of them. This was the variable no one wanted to talk about, but it was the one Harold felt would become more important than most. They needed these girls to be chaste. No man was going to allow his wife to work full-time once this war was over, so it was imperative that these candidates not be involved in romantic entanglements. It would make things easier for everyone.

Joshua was a good-looking kid, broad shouldered and dark haired, and nothing about his outward appearance gave away the 4-F

Harold had discovered in his file. Then again Joshua came from money and Harold knew how easy it was to purchase a rejection from service. But Lucy barely gave the boy a second glance, although when Harold looked closer he saw her hands were balled into fists in her lap.

"Sir," Joshua said, handing him a new file. "Dr. Lucas sent this your way. He's ready to open up the next study."

"Thank you," he said, nodding to the door to indicate Joshua was dismissed. As the boy passed Lucy, he smiled but she looked away, a frown sagging over her fair features, and Joshua left the room with heat burning on his cheeks.

"May I speak frankly?" Lucy asked.

Harold leaned back in his leather desk chair and pressed his fingertips together. "Of course."

"I don't know why I'm here, but I do know that men are dying every second you waste reading my

file."

Sass, Harold thought. Not a good sign at all. Lucas had said they needed a particular kind of girl, obedient girls who would do as they were told', but Harold Patton had to disagree. What they needed were girls like Lucy Price. They needed fighters.

"There's a trial beginning this afternoon," he said. "My secretary will show you to the laboratory."

Chapter 5

Joshua couldn't turn away from the force of the girl's gaze. He wanted to look at his chart and find her name, but he didn't dare turn away from her. Whatever was happening to her body clearly scared her, despite Lucas's assurance to Joshua that the new drug Valpron would make the subjects oblivious to the physical effects of the trial. Like many of the others Joshua would have given his own mother's life to end this war. He could no longer count on both hands how many friends he'd lost in the war.

But something about the girl's eyes made him want to sweep her away from this place. It made him question every reason he'd come to believe in the Cypress Project.

Joshua had thought Dr. Lucas was joking when he told him to pack up his things two weeks into the school year. The professor barely knew him, although he'd been instrumental in bringing Joshua in to Yale early. Something about his entrance exams had caught the man's eye, and from the moment Joshua arrived on campus Lucas had been watching him, quizzing him on some of the recent theoretical developments in physics.

The whole thing had been unnerving for the freshman, but once Lucas had revealed his ideas and some background about the project he'd written Joshua of earlier in the summer, Joshua was entranced. There had been little hesitation on his part when he'd realized Lucas's offer was genuine. Yale could wait for Joshua to help end the war.

More than once it occurred to him that his father might have been right.

Joshua could have been off lying in the mud in France, bleeding to death. Instead he was in Los Angeles using his brains to end the war.

And what would his father say then?

And then he'd seen the girl on that table. She'd been cold to him in Patton's office, unwilling to give him so much as a smile, and Joshua knew why. He knew what he must look like—a strapping boy of eighteen in khakis and a button-down. She'd noticed the absence of a uniform, and he'd felt shame over it. Shame he thought he'd left behind him in New Haven. And just like that he'd gone from being a man doing important work to being a rejected boy holding a 4-F file. Joshua had hated her almost as much as he hated himself in that moment.

But all that changed as he watched Lucas inject her. A few of the men—all business types who were financing the project—had elbowed Joshua when the nurse undressed the girl, but he'd kept his eyes on her face until she began to fight the serum coursing through her. Then he'd seen her breasts heave into the air as her back arched. He'd noticed how long her legs were as they spasmed and kicked against the cuffs that bound her. But even then he'd watched objectively. He had remained a scientist, taking notes about the effect of each injection, for Lucas to use later in his reports.

Until he looked into her eyes.

Fear flashed through them, counteracted easily by the Valpron Lucas had administered before they began the procedure, but in that split second something else had reflected from them: curiosity. She didn't know what was happening to her and if she had been able to ask Joshua in that moment, he wouldn't have been able to tell her either.

He could give her the canned pitch they used for the investors or the suits from the bureaucratic side of the War Department: that the serums isolated particular genetic abilities and enhanced them. As Lucas had explained it to him, it was like giving someone better than perfect vision and reflexes. Not only would candidates be able to see the most essential components of the universe around them, best described as threads that made up all of matter, they would be able to manipulate these threads as well. The entire Cypress Project depended on it.

But Joshua knew that wouldn't answer the girl's questions, because it was about so much more than that. For the first time Joshua himself wondered what was really happening. There was a difference between theory and application. Watching her endure the serums showed him that, which led him to the same inevitable question: What would happen? If they were successful at harvesting and manipulating the material that comprised time and matter, how would that be used to end the war?

Those answers were classified: well beyond his level of security clearance.

But there was one thing that wasn't: the name of the girl.

Chapter 6

She was being watched. They hadn't bothered to hide it from her. There was a window in her quarters where scientists watched her sleep and dress. Nurses escorted her to every meal and meeting. Lucy's memory of the procedure was hazy at best, and now she wasn't sure what to expect.

They certainly expected something from her, but she didn't feel any different. The mirror still reflected the blond waves and a freckled nose that she'd had every day of her life. On the outside there was no change.

At first she didn't think there was a change on the inside either. She was accustomed to questioning things, but since the procedure she'd been plagued by strange lapses in her memory. Every once in a while the light in the room seemed to catch like fabric on a nail, drawing her attention to the spot only to discover nothing amiss.

A nurse left her in a small waiting room, not unlike her doctor's back home, but there were no charts or posters about health on the wall.

Everything was bare-bones, the room stripped down to an exam table and two chairs. She tried not to think about the cinder-block walls and lack of windows.

There was a knock at the door and she called out that she was ready. In truth, she hadn't known whether or not to get undressed. She had no idea why she was here and she wasn't going to hesitate now. Lucy wanted answers to all the questions tumbling around her head.

But when the door opened it was a young man. Lucy noted his strong, smooth jawline. He was handsome, but young. The kind of man who would only get better looking with time. There was something familiar about him, but she couldn't quite place where she had seen him until she realized that was an answer in and of itself. A memory of his eyes watching over herblurred through her mind.

Lucy's hands twisted in her lap. They were slick with sweat and she hoped the man wouldn't try to offer his hand in introduction.

"Miss Price, I hope you haven't been waiting for long," he said, dropping into the other chair.

“I haven’t,” Lucy assured him. “I wasn’t sure if I was to be examined again. I should have asked. Do you need me to get undressed? Has the procedure worked? When will they stop watching me?”

The man blinked at the onslaught of questions, then smiled. “I was about to ask if you had any questions, but I see that’s unnecessary.”

“I’m sorry. I tend to bottle them all up until they spill out . . .

Doctor.” She tacked on the title as an afterthought, although she stole a shy glance at him when she did.

“I’m not a doctor,” he said in a rush. “I’m Doctor’ Lucas’s research assistant. Joshua.”

“I thought you looked too young to be a doctor,” Lucy said, her blush deepening.

“Perhaps I’m a prodigy,” Joshua said.

“You are involved with this project, so you must be smart.”

“As are you.”

“I’m a lab rat,” Lucy said. They both knew that, but it was nice of him to act as if she was a vital piece of the program rather than the subject of an experiment.

Joshua shook his head. “No, you aren’t. You have no idea how important you are.”

“Because they gave me a few shots?” The prick of the needles was one of the only clear memories she had of the procedure.

“To start with.” Joshua stood and drew a stethoscope out of his pocket.

“May I?”

“I thought you weren’t a doctor,” she said even as she nodded her assent.

“This I’m capable of, but you probably shouldn’t allow me to cut you open or deliver a baby.”

“Thankfully, I’ve no need of either service.”

Joshua stood over her and paused. She noticed the hesitation and realized he needed her to unbutton her blouse. She tried to look confident and casual as though the thought of the handsome young man, who was definitely not a doctor, touching her bare skin didn’t bother her in the least. But her fingers fumbled on the buttons and she had to try three times before she managed to open the top one.

“I’m afraid this is rather cold. Hold on.” Joshua rubbed the stethoscope with his fingers. “A little better.”

“It’s fine,” Lucy said, but her voice was high-pitched and unconvincing.

But when his fingers brought the stethoscope to her chest, they brushed along her skin, trailing fire in their path. Her breath hitched in her throat.

“Take a few deep breaths for me,” he said in a low voice.

She did as he asked, and he listened. Lucy was certain that he was noting the rapid beating of her heart. He probably thought something was wrong with her, or even worse, perhaps he guessed that her body was responding to his touch. She wasn't sure which was more distressing.

Joshua moved behind her and gently slid the metal diaphragm of the stethoscope down her back. As he did, he swept her loose hair over her shoulder and for just a moment Lucy imagined his lips on the back of her neck. She pushed the thought aside. She was being silly and girlish, two traits she'd loathed in her girlfriends at school. And of all the places to lose her head! She had been recruited for a special mission. She was here at the request of the War Department. Now was no time to get goofy over a boy.

"You didn't enlist?" she asked him.

Joshua's hand slipped and the stethoscope slithered down the back of her blouse. He drew it up in a hasty motion.

That was when she recalled where she had first seen him: at her briefing with Patton. She'd been haughty to him, but somehow between then and now her impression of him had changed. She could only guess that it had to do with the barely recalled memory she had of him during the procedure.

"I was listed as 4-F," he admitted to her.

"Oh." Lucy felt very stupid, and she had to bite back the question every girl thought of upon hearing a young man was deemed 4-F.

But Joshua seemed to know what she was thinking. "There's nothing wrong with me. I'm in working order. My father paid someone to get me rejected. He knew it was the only way to keep me from going."

"It's not really my business," she said.

“They’d like to run a few more tests,” Joshua said, his tone becoming businesslike.

“Of course.” Lucy buttoned her blouse and followed him out of the room.

The machine was unlike anything she’d ever seen. It took up half the wall with its gleaming gears and tubes. She wasn’t certain she knew what to do, but she perched on the stool, which looked almost comical next to the great mechanical beast it sat before, and waited for instructions.

A few men with horn-rimmed glasses, including the one who had interviewed her when she arrived, waited nearby, but no one spoke.

Joshua flipped a switch and the gears whirred to life, revealing a panel of light and color that shimmered in front of her.

“What do I do?” she asked him in a quiet voice so the others wouldn’t hear.

“Do you see it?” he asked.

“The web?”

Joshua’s jaw tensed but he bobbed his head.

“Yes. It’s beautiful.” And it was. There were colors Lucy had only seen in dreams, displayed with a sparkling vibrance that sent a chill up her back. What did they expect her to do with it? What *was* it?

But when Lucy looked up there was a gleam in Joshua’s eyes and the men had come closer. Whatever

it was, it was important.

Chapter 7

“Can you touch it?” This was the real test. Several other girls had been able to view the matter on the loom, but none had been able to capture it in their hands. A few had come close, but day by day the project team had grown more disappointed. Even now the War Department was considering disbanding the program. That’ was why they’d had to bring in the private financiers. Men like Patton who watched everything too closely for Joshua’s comfort.

Lucy reached out and brushed the large, airy panel in front of her.

Whatever she could see, Joshua could not. Lucas had tried the serum himself, so he could be certain it worked, but he hadn’t allowed any of the other men working on the project to do so. That meant that when he wasn’t present, Joshua had to rely on the honesty of the girls. But he never doubted that any of them saw the weave. It showed in their eyes—the awe of it. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t jealous that he couldn’t see the elements of the universe laid out before him, especially given that these girls didn’t even know what they were looking at.

None of them had a clue that they had been given the ability to see the very threads of life.

But Lucy was different. Her awe was measured and removed. She seemed almost hesitant to go further, but as she did, Joshua’s attention turned to the glass holding cell that sat in the middle of the room. To the average person it looked like a small greenhouse, full of leaves and vines, but the scientists had isolated the space inside for this very purpose.

“What should I do?” she asked him.

“Grab it,” he ordered.

His eyes never left the holding cell. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Lucy as she made her attempt, too much was riding on this girl and it made Joshua uncomfortable. But not because of what it might mean to the project if she failed. Joshua wasn’t certain he wanted her to succeed, which was what scared him. Nothing happened inside the cell and he dared a glance back at her.

Lucy's hands dipped through the space as though they were tangled up in the air in front of her. There was a gasp from one of the men in the room, and Joshua whirled around to discover that a large fern in the holding cell had begun to wilt before his eyes. It withered, its tips turning brown, and it shriveled, dying, until finally it disintegrated entirely.

Applause startled Lucy from her work and she turned to stare at the businessmen who were laughing and patting each other's backs. She looked to Joshua, but he couldn't think of a thing to say. His mind was too heavy with her success.

Patton lingered as the other investors shook hands and patted each other on the back. All they could see was the small success the girl had managed, but he could see more than that. Much more than that. The girl had killed the plant, but not in the way he had been expecting. He'd been warned that there were implications to the loom technology, but where the scientists involved on the project saw only the risk, Patton saw possibility.

His eyes narrowed as he watched the young man guiding the girl out of the lab. That was a situation that needed to be controlled.

Impressionable girls couldn't be trusted around young men, who could rarely be trusted at all.

Someone cleared his throat and Patton was startled out of his thoughts.

He adjusted his bow tie and turned toward the other party without hurry.

It was important that the scientists remembered who was funding their little project after all.

"May I help you?" The man's white lab coat brushed the knees of his wrinkled slacks. Patton's nose wrinkled at the sight, and the man caught the look. "I'm certainly a mess, but I've been sleeping at my desk.

Someone has ordered tests be conducted twenty-four hours a day."

Patton already knew that. As the project's largest financial backer, he had insisted the trials run continuously. He was certain this man knew exactly with whom he was speaking, which meant the man knew he was the reason for the exhaustive schedule. But Patton admired the arrogance of the

casual remark enough to step forward and feign oblivion. He thrust a hand out. “Harold Patton.”

“Dr. Lucas.” The man shook his hand firmly but quickly, stepping around Patton to fiddle with a large panel of buttons.

“And you’re the head scientist on this project?”

“I am one of them,” Dr. Lucas corrected him.

“And the others?”

“What can I help you with, Mr. Patton?” he asked, skirting Patton’s question none toosubtly, and continuing to check down the row of panels.

“I have a question about the experiment I just witnessed,” Patton said.

He placed his body in front of the next instrument panel, so that Lucas was forced to look up at him.

The doctor raised an eyebrow as he crossed his arms, a clear signal of defeat.

“The girl didn’t merely remove the plant from the weave. She mutilated it,” Patton said.

“The important thing is that she was able to touch it,” Lucas said. His eyes flickered past his visitor to the panel.

“This will only take a few seconds of your time.” And if Harold was right, it could buy both of them enough time to waste. “The plant wasn’t just mutilated though. It seemed almost as though it was undone. How is that possible?”

Lucas scratched his head, surprised by the thought-provoking question.

“These are the very building blocks of our world. It’s not unthinkable that if she could touch the strands, she could destroy them. A child knows how to knock down a tower of blocks after all.”

“You noticed nothing strange then about what happened to the plant?”

Patton pressed.

“I suppose I didn’t,” Lucas said, wondering when the other man would leave so he could stop playing wet nurse to investors. “Did you?”

“She didn’t destroy the plant, Doctor. Any child can knock down a tower or rip up a plant.” Patton stopped, counting on the doctor’s curiosity to show itself. ’Lucas finally stopped fidgeting with his equipment and gave him his full attention.

“I’m not sure I follow your meaning.”

Patton’s lip curled like a cat’s. “The girl killed the plant all right, but not by ripping it up. She pulled something out of it.”

“And what do you think that was, Mr. Patton?”

“Life itself,” he answered without a second thought.

Chapter 8

Chills shivered through Lucy's body, settling into her stomach, which rolled and clenched. She did her best to hide it from Joshua, not wanting to appear weak. There had been a breakthrough. She wasn't clear on what had happened exactly, but the investors had cheered and congratulated each other. No one had spoken to her—it was as though she was just part of the machine, but that hardly mattered. All she cared about was ending the war.

Joshua walked beside her, keeping pace with her slow steps without complaint. Lucy dared a glance at him and felt a flutter in her chest that wasn't an aftereffect of her time at the loom.

"I'll have the nurses bring you some food." Joshua's eyes swept over her. They crinkled in concern so she plastered on a wide smile.

"I could use something to eat," she admitted.

"Anything in the world," he said.

"Do you have any chocolate? I know it's being rationed—""

"You're working for the War Department," he reminded her.

"So I get a soldier's ration then?" she asked. A giggle bubbled past her lips, and she turned away, cheeks blazing, shocked at the girlish side Joshua brought out in her.

"Of course," he said. "You're defending our country now."

Lucy thought of Nicholas, alone and cold on a field in France, ripping open the K-rations that served

as his meals. She wondered how often he had received chocolate as part of his rations on those bloodied fields.

She shook her head. “I don’t need any,” she said to Joshua in a strangled voice. “It wouldn’t be right.”

“Why not?” He grabbed her arm and forced her to stop in the hallway.

“Because those soldiers are out there dying to save people they’ve never met and I caught a chill?”

A shadow passed over Joshua’s face so quickly Lucy wondered if she had imagined it. His lips pressed into a thin line that he managed to curve into a smile but Lucy was certain she had upset him. She didn’t quite understand why though.

“Oh,” she said as realization dawned on her. “I didn’t mean that I. . .

or that you—”

He held up a hand to stop her. “I’m overly sensitive and you’re too selfless. It will never do.”

Lucy cocked an eyebrow at him.

“We’ve had a major breakthrough today. Both of us. We should be celebrating,” he said.

“I’m sure the cafeteria will have something delightful for us to eat,”

Lucy said, but Joshua was grinning at her now in earnest. “What is it?”

“I have an idea,” he said. “What would you say to getting out of here tonight?”

She hesitated. No one had told her she couldn't leave the compound, but it had been implied by the tight security she saw throughout the halls.

"Are we allowed to?"

"You're allowed to with me," he reassured her as they passed a group of silent guards. "What do you say?"

Lucy sucked in a breath and nodded. "Okay, I'll go, but it's on you if we get in trouble."

Joshua caught her hand and kissed it swiftly. "Leave everything to me."

Lucy hadn't packed much when she boarded the train to Chicago. She'd thought she would return home. It was a rather foolish notion in hindsight, but Mr. Watson had insisted she leave straightaway for Los Angeles. His speech was impassioned enough to convince her to board another train with the small case she'd brought with her. He'd promised to ring her mother for her, explaining that the secrecy of the project mandated all communication with her family go through the War Department. This hadn't seemed an odd request then, given that they'd received all correspondence from Nicholas through the army. His letters had been read by censors. He wasn't allowed to phone. Even the notice of his death had been filtered through the proper beauracratic channels, delivered by a stranger in a stiff uniform.

She hadn't considered that she'd have occassion for more than a few pieces, so there was really only one thing to wear for an evening out with Joshua: a soft cotton sundress that had faded a bit with washing, leaving the dots pale, like they'd been left too long in the sun. It would have to do though, and despite its weary appearance it clung to her body, accentuating the curves that grew softer and more womanly with each passing year. She had no makeup, but she twisted her hair into elaborate pin curls.

"You look lovely, miss," the night-shift nurse said as she made her rounds.

Lucy bit her lip and gathered her courage. "I'm meeting one of the scientists for dinner."

If this shocked the nurse, she didn't show it.

"All you need is this then." The nurse drew a gold tube out of her pocket and whipped off the lid. "Summer cherry."

Lucy took the lipstick awkwardly. She'd worn lipstick before, but nothing quite this dramatic. One wrong swipe and she'd look like a traveling-circus clown. But she managed to apply it in smooth, precise strokes.

"You've got good, steady hands, miss," the nurse said as Lucy returned the lipstick to her.

"Thank you," Lucy murmured, but her eyes were frozen on her reflection, marveling at how different she appeared. One simple cosmetic and she looked years older. More sophisticated. A wave of confidence overcame her and she smiled to the girl in the glass.

"Have a nice night."

As soon as the nurse was gone, Lucy slipped into the hall. She had arranged to meet Joshua near the cafeteria. Neither had spoken much more about whether they would get in trouble if they left, but Joshua seemed eager to avoid any security entanglements. There was a backdoor near the cafeteria that led out to the parking lot and Dr. Lucas's car, which Joshua had arranged to borrow for the evening.

Joshua turned and caught sight of her heading toward him, and his mouth fell open. He had a single daisy in his hand, but when she reached him, he didn't speak.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said, recovering himself. “Lucas’s car is out back.”

“Is that—” She pointed to the flower that Joshua was suffocating in his hand.

“Yes,” he said, thrusting it toward her. The stem was broken and the petals had been crushed. “A lovely gesture.”

She followed him out the back door and to a Cadillac. Whatever Lucas did in that lab must have been important given his expensive car.

“It looks like a car fit for a movie star,” Lucy said, but she immediately clamped her mouth shut. It was embarrassing to think that Joshua now probably suspected she read the Hollywood rags that reported on the most minuscule information available. She didn’t really need to know what Grace Kelly ate for breakfast or who was secretly in love with who, but she read them anyway. They were an easier escape for her than the movies, which showed so much of the war in the shorts they ran between features.

“You follow the silver screen then?” Joshua’s smile widened.

“Doesn’t everyone?” Lucy couldn’t really understand people who turned up their noses at actors and actresses.

“Then you’ll like where we’re headed tonight.” He opened the door and helped her into the passenger seat.

They spoke throughout the ride, learning that they both enjoyed reading more than movies. Joshua shared that he was an only child, and Lucy told him about Nicholas. He sensed a weight lift from her shoulders as she spoke her brother’s name, and Joshua didn’t interrupt her even when her tone grew distant and reverent. She was running from something. Maybe it was only memories, but it was something they had in common.

Joshua stole a glance at her and tried to think of something witty or funny to say. He wanted to make her laugh, to give her a moment's reprieve from the grief that hung over her like a heavy winter coat. But he wasn't the type. He read books and studied physics. Joshua was dependable. He wasn't the guy who swept a girl off her feet.

"Did you have a boyfriend back home?" he asked. It wasn't going to make her laugh, but his rational mind wanted to know all the variables he might encounter even as he was quite convinced there was no sense in trying to be rational around Lucy Price. She was too intoxicating for him to think straight, but if she was off-limits, he might as well know now.

His question tripped a bemused smile from his companion. "No. I was never one for fooling around with boys."

"But there must have been someone. A . . ." Joshua trailed off before he could add *a pretty girl like you*. It was the kind of clichéd mumbo jumbo stars said to girls in motion pictures. But still, he reasoned, it was true enough. Lucy was too beautiful not to have attracted anyone's interest.

"A few tried," she said. "But I only recently shed my ugly-duckling feathers. The war was nearly on before I did, and girls can't compete with the call of fame and glory. What about you? Did you leave a girl back home?"

"My hometown is only a few hours from here, but I can assure you that no one misses me there."

"You don't know that," she said.

"I do actually," Joshua said, his eyes boring into the road ahead. "My father hasn't spoken to me since I informed him that I'd left Yale to work for the government."

"He must have been very angry," Lucy said.

“Yes. I suppose when you spend a small fortune trying to keep your son in a cage, you expect it to work,” Joshua said dryly.

“I think he wanted to protect you,” Lucy said in a soft voice. “My mother pretended to support Nicholas when he enlisted, but she cried every night for a month after he left. She told me that she didn’t want him to go. That she’d never see him again. I tried to calm her down, but she insisted that he would never come home again. She said she could feel it.”

Joshua heard the ache of tears in her voice and he slowed the car.

“Maybe parents just know,” Lucy continued, her voice cracking. “Maybe your father knew and couldn’t bear it.”

“But your mother let you come here,” Joshua said. “She respected your decision and your brother’s.”

“She doesn’t know I’m here,” Lucy confessed.

Joshua stopped the car entirely, the tires crunching gravel as they came to a halt. “You didn’t tell her?”

“The man who recruited me told me that I couldn’t,” Lucy said. Her eyebrows knit together as she stared at him.

“Why would he say that?”

“For security reasons.” Her answer felt rehearsed somehow as though she’d not only been fed the line but also believed it.

“You should tell your mother,” he said, starting the car back up and continuing down the road.

“Weren’t you the one just telling me how horrible your father was?” she asked, crossing her thin arms over her chest.

“Even still, I phoned him to let him know where I was,” Joshua said.

“I’ll put in a request for you. She must be terribly worried.”

“She’s so sad about Nicholas that she probably hasn’t even noticed I’m gone,” Lucy said.

“Remember what you said about parents knowing a few moments ago? Right now she doesn’t know and that’s bound to be driving her more crazy,” he said.

Lucy didn’t say anything and they sat in silence under a blanket of stars.

“Where are you taking me anyway?” she asked. “We appear to be in the middle of nowhere. Should I call my mother now?”

His lip twisted up. “You’re safe with me, and it’s a surprise.”

“As long as you aren’t taking me off to be murdered.” She tried to keep her face straight but the twitch of her lips gave her away.

“I said it was a surprise,” Joshua said. “I suppose you’ll have to wait and see.”

But she didn't have to wait long, and as soon as the sign loomed up over the horizon, he dared another glance at her.

"The Hollywood Canteen?" Lucy's eyes were as round as silver dollars and the stars overhead seemed to dance in them.

"Absolutely," he said. It wasn't that he wanted to impress her exactly, but he guessed that a girl from small-town Illinois might think it was swell to see movie stars. Joshua had seen them his whole life. He hadn't bothered to tell her that he'd spent a good portion of his formative years on back lots. It wasn't something he liked to talk about if he could help it.

A polished and obviously physically fit man greeted them at the door.

"Tickets?"

"I'll be on the list," Joshua said.

The man gave him a disbelieving look but retrieved a small card. "Your name?"

"Joshua O'Donnell."

"Yes, sir," the man said, stepping aside immediately. "This way, please."

"Were you a movie star before you decided to take over the world?" Lucy whispered as they entered the swinging canteen.

It had been a country bar before a group of Hollywood elites had hatched their plan to open a canteen for soldiers. No one had bothered to update it to something more posh, so the walls were still painted with cartoonish Western scenes. Long, rustic beams lined the ceilings, in stark contrast to the ten-

piece band playing on the stage and the celebrities sprinkled throughout the joint. It wasn't the kind of place starlets would normally flock to, but it wasn't for them—it was for enlisted men, and it was the best way showbiz could find to help, even if it was only giving them a good time before they left to die on foreign soil.

"No," Joshua said with a laugh, checking his fedora. The girl at the counter had ringlets of spun gold that hung perfectly to her shoulders and waved over her forehead. She was really much too pretty to be a coat-check girl. Joshua caught Lucy staring at her.

"Is she an actress?" Lucy asked.

"She'd like to be," Joshua said. "She's clearly been groomed for it, but the American people have less patience for new faces these days. They want their favorites, to keep their minds off the war."

"Are you sure you aren't an actor?" Lucy asked, her eyes narrowing.

"You seem to know a lot about show business."

"I'm not an actor," Joshua said as a hostess took them to one of the best tables in the house. "But my father is."

"Wait!" Lucy shrieked. "Is your father Mickey O'Donnell?"

"The one and only," Joshua said. Now that she'd found out, he wished she hadn't. Any girl would want a piece of the fortune now that his father had begun producing films as well. There was even talk of making him head of MGM, but Joshua thought it was unlikely given his father's volatile temper.

"I saw one of his movies," she said. "And I've seen him in the gossip rags."

“Whatever you read isn’t true. He’d want me to tell you that.”

“Is any of it true?” she asked Joshua.

“Almost all of it, but actors are liars and they expect their children to be as well,” he told her. “Lying is a family business in Hollywood.”

“It’s really too bad you don’t get along,” Lucy said. Her eyes darted around the room and she gasped, pointing out celebrities serving tables and dancing with soldiers. There was no more mention of Joshua’s father, which Joshua found refreshing. She’d only seen one of his movies after all, and, of course, she’d read about him. But she didn’t seem interested past that.

“Do you want to dance?” he asked her.

“I don’t really. I haven’t ever...I don’t dance.” She stumbled over the words. “You should ask someone else.”

Joshua felt a sharp snap in his heart as though it had broken and mended itself in a split second. He couldn’t explain it. He simply knew he wanted to hold her, so he sidestepped her excuse and extended his hand.

Their eyes met and she took the proffered hand without further protest, allowing him to sweep her onto the floor. They waltzed next to Frank Sinatra and later Joshua taught her how to Jitterbug.

“You told me that you didn’t dance,” he admonished her as they stepped outside for air.

“I don’t. I think I only could because you were here.”

Joshua caught her in his arms and pulled her roughly to him. Lucy’s face glowed in the moonlight.

There was a pretty color in her cheeks, rose washed to silver in the dim night.

“Has anyone kissed you before, Lucy Price?” Joshua asked.

She shook her head, causing a single curl to loosen and fall across her brow. He brushed it away, trailing his fingers down her her face and cupping her chin in his hand.

“May I kiss you?” he whispered. An eternity stretched between them before she said the word he needed to hear.

“Yes.” She barely managed to push the word past her lips before his mouth was on hers. The kiss consumed her so fully that her body relaxed, nearly going limp in his arms, and she swayed just a little as he held her steady.

Lucy had never kissed a boy before. The war had broken out around the time they started to interest her, and while her friends listened with dreamy eyes to schoolboy plans for guts and glory, Lucy didn’t have the stomach for it. But now with Joshua’s lips pressed hot to hers she crumpled against him, thoughts of the dead and the dying slipping as far away as the stars twinkling overhead. His arm wrapped more tightly around her waist, and she fell further into the moment until there was only the roar of her pulse urging the kiss on. When he broke away, he dropped his forehead against hers and they stared into each other’s eyes, both knowing a line had been crossed.

But neither caring.

“We should get back to the base,” he said. He stepped away from her and looked toward Lucas’s car.

She knew he was right, although she wanted to stay here forever. The only thing that waited back on base were tests and scientists, needles and examinations. But Lucy looped her arm through his, allowing him to lead her to the car. It would be over soon. The war would be over and they would be free, but that all seemed too far away tonight when her life felt like it was finally beginning.

Chapter 9

Patton lounged in his chair as Dr. Lucas poured two bourbons and handed one to him. The man's office was small and spare, nothing like the places where Patton did business. It was a scientist's lair, stuffed with so many books and papers that there was no room for decorations or furniture beyond the two chairs and table Lucas used to do his research.

"Then you've found exactly what I thought?" Patton asked, wishing to clarify the good news Lucas had just given him.

"I believe so." The doctor's forehead creased as he sipped his drink. He clearly wasn't as thrilled at the unexpected development. "The implications of the findings are quite disturbing."

"I would think a man who had discovered the key to immortality might feel some pride." Patton chuckled at the dumbfounded expression on Lucas's face.

"But at what cost? We must consider the ethical issues at stake."

Patton set his glass on the table and chose his words carefully. It was important that he not sound threatening. "The Cypress Project needs more money. I have that money, and so do many of my associates. We've all done our bit for our country at this point, and more than a few of us are wondering how far you plan to drain our piggy banks to get this off the ground."

"I'm certain the investors understand that what they are doing—"

"The investors are quite simply that: investors. Businessmen don't get into business to help people out. We expect remuneration."

"And the War Department has already informed you that your places in Arras are secure."

“We don’t just want *places* in Arras,” Patton said. “This new world of yours is going to need leaders, and I can only speak for myself, but I’ll be happy to step up in return for some special considerations.”

Lucas pulled his glasses from his nose and ran a hand over his tired eyes. “Even without the ethical considerations, it could be years before technology enables us to accomplish what you’re asking.”

“And we will have years, Dr. Lucas,” Patton reminded him. “Thanks to your machines, we’ll be able to control time."

Patton sensed this line of argument was getting him nowhere. He needed to make the man see the possibility before him. “Think of what you can do with that time. How much you can accomplish. All it will take is a few words from you and some contracts with my lawyers. I can promise you that I won’t be the only one who reaps the benefits of your discovery.”

“My unintentional discovery,” Lucas said. “And how can you promise me anything?”

“This administration is desperate to see the war end, as is most of the world. They’d promise a man anything if he could put a stop to it, and with my money I’m the man who can pay for that solution.”

“I’m not certain you’re wealthy enough for that.”

“I’ve spoken with others. Hearst. Kincaid. They’re all in as long as you continue the research privately. There’s no need to involve the War Department.”

“Money won’t do you much good once the exodus is over. The administration plans to initiate a socialist structure while Arras is established. Everyone will have to work together—”

“And they will.” Patton stopped him. “But until then, money can buy me power. You won’t be left out in the cold, Lucas. We’ll take care of you as long as you take care of us.”

His companion opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated and clamped it shut again. Patton almost had him.

“We’ll live forever,” Patton promised. “Think of that.”

“All of us?”

“The fortunate few,” Patton said in a measured voice.

“And you expect people to go along with that? A good portion of Arras’s population is going to be American, Mr. Patton. I can’t imagine they’ll take too kindly to a few men running the show in perpetuity.”

“You’re thinking of this too clinically,” Patton said. “It’s simple with a bit of creativity. Our names, the names of these ‘few men,’ will die and we’ll be reborn as new men. The people won’t know their leaders haven’t changed. Given your experiments with alterations, I hardly think it will be difficult to smooth this over. And we’ll have plenty of time to handle the arrangements.”

“It strikes me that might be more a curse than a blessing.”

“As my friend Kincaid would say, ‘To be or not to be.’ Are you ready to watch the world destroy itself? Because this war will spread. My sources expect it won’t be long until it crosses the Atlantic, and then where will we find the solution when we’re hunkered down in bomb shelters?” It was a carefully chosen lie. His sources thought nothing of the sort.

Hitler seemed intent on Western Europe at the moment, but it *could* happen, which Patton knew, and which gave him the ability to sell it to Lucas. “In Arras you’ll have time to eradicate disease and hunger. We will lift humanity up to the next stage of evolution. These boys you’ve been testing could

be more important than doctors someday. Imagine being able to alter the foundational blocks of biology."

A gleam was growing in Lucas's eyes as Patton continued his speech, and soon the doctor began to nod in agreement with the promises.

"Perhaps I should send a telegram to Albert," Lucas suggested. "If anyone could foresee—"

"You've said yourself that the most important thing is to end this war.

Let's focus on that for now," Patton said. He rose from his chair and retrieved his fedora. "I'll be in touch. I only ask you to keep this between us for now, and I'll see that you get what you need for the first stage."

He exited the room, but not before he saw Lucas begin to scribble furiously in the file. He would have to return for it later. For now he had more important things to do. One phone call and he'd be in charge of this alterations department. Then he would see what they could really do. Lucas's initial notes had been very *promising*.

And after that was final, he'd handle Lucas. He'd bought him off for the moment, but he couldn't be certain that would last long. The doctor was burdened with a conscience unsuited to ambition or science. He'd have to find someone else more flexible with his so-called ethics. Patton knew that wouldn't be hard. He'd never had difficulty finding people willing to sell their soul before.

Chapter 10

Lucas wrote with such speed that his hand cramped, but he ignored it. He had to reach Albert immediately, but it was difficult to get a line into Nevada at the moment.

Men like Patton were used to getting what they wanted and Lucas hadn't given it to him. Patton had some fair points. Things Lucas might have considered if he'd been given the time, but this world wasn't Arras.

There was a war on, men were dying, and it would be all too easy for Patton to buy someone off. A senator, or a general, or even one of Lucas's own men.

Patton displays a near psychopathic disregard for the general population, imagining the alteration technology will be the proverbial fountain of youth. His clear God complex suggests he will try to buy this technology to further his own agenda. It's recommended that we sever our business relationships with Mr. Patton.We cannot wait for a moment of kairosfor this, we must seek resolution as swiftly as possible before it is too late.

Lucas sank against his chair and stared at the letter, remembering for a split second the wayward message sent by Juliet to Romeo, but this was not a love story and more than two lives hung in the balance. He'd take it there himself in the morning.

The base was quiet when they returned, but Joshua knew the night guards would make a note of what time they'd come in and pass it up the chain.

He hadn't actually told Lucas he was taking Lucy with him andhe was pretty sure his mentor wouldn't have approved of him absconding with their prize candidate for the Cypress Project. But the real reason he wished he could avoid word of their date spreading was because he wanted to keep it himself. It was their secret sealed with a kiss.

Thinking of the kiss distracted him and he glanced over at her. She shifted her long, stockinged legs and smiled at him. He wanted to kiss her again, but he kept his hands on the wheel and parked the car. They were back on base and he needed to think with his head instead of with the other parts of his anatomy vying to run the show.

“Joshua,” Lucy said in a quiet voice when he shut off the engine.

He turned toward her, leaning in to kiss her again before he could stop himself. She giggled and pulled back.

“I have a question for you.”

“Shoot,” he said, a little disappointed that she’d fended him off.

“What are they testing me for? What do they plan to do?”

He could lie and tell her he didn’t know, that he didn’t have the clearance, which would technically be true. But Joshua did know because he was a Hollywood kid and he’d learned a long time ago that nobody in business talked straight. To get the real story, you had to listen to the unspoken lines between sentences and to the conversations not meant for your ears, and Joshua hadn’t been able to help himself. Some of it he’d guessed from the equations and models he’d helped Lucas with, but scientists also loved to talk to themselves, as they worked through complex problems. And no one had a temper like a pissed-off researcher.

One good rant could spill all the beans.

So he knew exactly what she wanted to know, but it wasn’t going to be easy to explain. It all sounded so crazy, even after everything he’d seen. Lucy had managed to touch the quantum threads they’d given her.

She’d even affected them, but he doubted that would be enough to make her believe him.

“It’s better if I show you,” he said.

Because of the success earlier in the day, the labs were dead now. The breakthrough had been enough to warrant Lucas giving everyone the night off. Joshua thought Lucas might have stuck around himself;

he'd seemed preoccupied, but then the man was never relaxed. To Joshua's relief though, even Lucas's office lights were off.

Every man and woman on Lucas's team had signed a contract stating that they wouldn't leave so much as a handkerchief lying around, but Lucas himself kept files in his office. Files that Joshua had access to. He led Lucy through the dark, stopping at the office door to dig around for the key. It would have felt like a breach of trust if it had been anyone but Lucy he was showing the information to. She was directly involved with this project and she had the right to know what they were going to ask her for. The lock clicked open, and he went in first, fumbling for the lamp. But when he flipped the switch and light flooded the room, he wished he hadn't come.

Lucy's scream barely registered. He couldn't tear his eyes from the body of his mentor collapsed across his desk. The back of his head was missing, leaving behind a thick ooze of blood that swirled black and red. Hideous gray clumps were splattered on the chair behind him.

"Did he . . ." Lucy's voice trailed away, and Joshua was grateful. He couldn't believe Lucas would do this. He did not want to believe it. Not when he was so close.

"We should call someone," Lucy said, tugging his arm gently and trying to lead him away.

But Joshua ignored her. Once the guards came, there would be investigators and questions. They would ask him about what had happened.

They would ask Lucy. And neither of them would have any real answers to give. Joshua had questions of his own, and right now they seemed more important. In particular, *why?*

"He wouldn't," Joshua said. It was more a wish than a fact.

"Maybe there's a note," Lucy suggested.

Despite the grisly state of the desk, Joshua stepped forward and carefully sorted through the papers

around Lucas's body. There was nothing. No note. No report that might explain why Lucas had taken such a drastic measure. He went around to the back of the desk and opened the single drawer, only to find a few pens and a picture of Lucas's wife and son.

Perhaps it was that he didn't want to believe his mentor would take his own life or perhaps it was that photograph or maybe it was the different angle, but when he looked back up at the desk, it struck him that the desk was too neat. Too organized. Matthew Lucas was a genius at everything but organizing

"Someone straightened his papers," he said in a hoarse whisper. Lucy moved next to him and took his hand.

"Maybe a secretary before . . ."

"No." Joshua shook his head. "No one was allowed to touch his desk but me. He said I was too young to know any better."

"Than to mess with his stuff?"

"Than to steal it," Joshua said. A chill began at the base of his skull in the exact spot that was now missing from his mentor's head. He had been murdered, Joshua was sure, but there was no proof. "Someone's killed him."

Lucy sucked in a breath, but didn't speak.

"There's no way to prove that. I'm sure I sound crazy, but I know it, Lucy."

Her girlish face was pale, maybe even a little green from their discovery, but she gave him a small, supportive smile. "I believe you.

But if he was, maybe we should leave. Whoever did this—”

“Could come after us,” he finished for her. She was right. The longer he stayed there searching for clues, the more danger he was placing her in. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Wait.” Lucy grabbed his arm. “What’s that?”

She pointed to the chair and Joshua saw a piece of paper sticking out of Lucas’s pant pocket. It had been shoved in hastily and Joshua was able to pull it free easily. He ignored the cling of iron on his tongue from the heavy scent of blood around the desk and smoothed the paper out. It was a note addressed to Albert. Joshua didn’t know any Alberts on the base, but it was clear from the content of the note that this man was working on the Cypress Project.

“What does it mean?” Lucy asked. Her voice was high, but other than that and a slight tremble in her hands, Joshua thought she was holding up remarkably well.

“They’re building a new world, Lucy,” he told her, the truth spilling out. There was no time to wait for proof. Lucas had surely died because of what he’d discovered. “They’re going to create a world with those machines they’ve been testing you on, and girls like you are going to create it.”

“That’s not possible,” she said. “What is he talking about though?

‘Fountain of youth’?”

“I’m not sure. There are other experiments going on. Soldiers have been brought in. I haven’t seen any of them myself, but I heard Lucas talking about the things they could do. They can manipulate people. Change them.

There’s an entire department devoted to studying this alteration ability.”

“Change them how?” Her voice was hollow, and he worried she might faint.

“Change their memories. Maybe even their faces. Lucas said the experiments were a bust. Unethical. He was going to stop them,” Joshua said. But he hadn’t been able to. Someone had stopped him first. Up until this moment Joshua had believed he was working for the greater good. Now he wasn’t so sure that the Cypress Project wasn’t going to destroy the entire world. It was supposed to end violence, but now Joshua was staring at proof that it was going to do the opposite.

“We need to find out who Albert is,” Lucy said. “Anyone here could have killed the doctor.”

“But Lucas trusted Albert, and he kept this message safe. He didn’t want his killer to discover it.”

“No, he didn’t.” It wasn’t Lucy’s voice. It was a man’s, and the couple looked up, startled.

“How long have you been there?” Lucy asked Patton in a whisper.

“Long enough.” Patton snapped a finger and two guards rushed into the room. Joshua struggled against them and Lucy came to his aid, kicking at the guard. The man struck her hard across the face and the blow knocked her to the ground.

“Lucy!” Joshua cried, losing focus only to find his hands pinned behind his back as a pair of handcuffs snapped shut over his wrists. The guard pushed him out the door past Patton, but Joshua pulled away, cornering Patton against the door. “You did this!”

“I wouldn’t say anything more,” Patton said. “Your fingerprints are all over that room, and then you attacked that poor girl.”

“What are you going to do to her?” Joshua snarled.

“She’ll be fine, I can promise you. The Cypress Project needs her. You, however, are expendable.”

And at a flick of Patton’s wrist, Joshua was dragged away.

The End. . .

She awoke under a light so bright that for a moment she thought she was blind, but as Lucy blinked shapes swam around her. As the seconds passed, the room stayed fuzzy and out of focus. If it weren’t for the outlines of the light and the crease where the walls met in the corner, she might have thought she was dead. Then there was the matter of the cuffs that strapped her down to the bed.

Her throat felt stuffed with cotton, and she couldn’t force a swallow to wet it. Although she was mostly blind, all her other senses were as sharp as the tip of a knife. Lucy felt the pulse of blood in her dry throat. She thought she might be able to count each hair on her body as they stood up, alert to the danger she’d found herself in.

Because despite having very little memory of how she’d got here, she knew she was in trouble.

Something had gone horribly wrong and it didn’t take perfect vision or a clear memory to tell her that.

The door clicked open and Lucy heard the *tap tap tap* of shoes on tile, growing closer with each step and then the stranger spoke, or rather barked, “Turn that light down.”

She froze when she heard the voice, and a rush of memories came back to her in a tangle. She sorted through them until she found the face the voice belonged to: Patton.

“What have you done with Joshua?” The question scratched across her parched tongue.

“You’re awake,” Patton said.

Lucy fought against the panic tumbling through her body, but she stayed calm. Patton wasn’t the type to take kindly to a hysterical girl, and thankfully Lucy had never qualified as one. The door behind her had begun to open and close to a stream of traffic, but Patton was the only one interested in speaking to her. The others didn’t look at her, even as they came to check the monitor by her bed. A pretty young nurse with a freckled nose gave her a sip of water and then disappeared without a word. With others nearby, she was safe for now.

“Why am I in cuffs? And where is Joshua?” she asked again.

“Your young friend couldn’t join us,” Patton replied as he tapped a finger against her bindings. “He’s been . . . reassigned to avoid further issues.”

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Lucy said. Her voice rose an octave, not from fear, but from the injustice of her situation.

“Of course you didn’t, my dear. Young girls need to be protected from predators like Mr. O’Donnell. It was a mistake I won’t allow to happen again.” He hovered over her like a cat closing in on a mouse, and Lucy realized he’d only removed his competition. She shrank back against the exam table, but there was nowhere to go. She couldn’t run. She couldn’t call for help. No one nearby seemed concerned for her safety and without Joshua she was friendless here. She strained against her cuffs to distract herself from crying.

“I’m afraid that you’re much too important to our plans,” Patton said.

“We can’t afford for you to run off again.”

“I’ll cooperate,” she promised, but she couldn’t quite keep the hint of a lie out of her words.

“You *will* cooperate. I’ve already seen to that.”

The night’s events grew clearer with each passing moment, and bile rose in her mouth as she recalled Lucas’s body collapsed on his desk with the back of his skull blown out. She was in danger, which meant she had to play the one card she had. Lucy dropped her voice to a whisper. “I know what you’re planning.”

Patton’s jaw tightened, and Lucy thought he might strike her, but instead he straightened up. “Out!”

The others in the room exited swiftly and Patton locked the door of the lab behind them.

“I suppose you want to bargain then.” He drew up a stool and sat across from her bed. “What’s your *price* then, Miss Price?”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“A little joke,” he said, “to lighten the mood.”

“I suspect most things about you are little.”

The smug grin dropped from his face. “Let’s talk business. Before one of us does something we’ll regret.”

“You’re creating a new world,” Lucy said. “And keeping it from this one.”

“That’s hardly a secret. We can’t announce our intentions until we’re certain we will succeed.”

“And when you make the announcement, who gets to go and who will be left to die?” It wasn’t so much a question as an accusation.

Patton didn’t blink. “We can’t save everyone. This war has taught us that.”

“And who will you save? The rich? The powerful?”

“Yes, but we will also save the intelligent and the healthy and the strong. This new world—Arras—will be a fresh start for humanity. Imagine it, Miss Price. No wars. No famine. Soon not even disease. We can control it all.”

Lucy had heard crackpots talking before, trying to sell their visions to eager buyers. A friend had dragged her to a Pentecostal church once and she’d watched people speak in tongues and men heal the sick of heart. It had been revolting save for one thing: the fervent belief that had pervaded that tent. It had been palpable, hanging in the air like sticky, humid heat. How her heart had pounded, her cheeks growing red in the crush of the crowd. She’d almost believed it all herself.

She thought Patton could use a lesson or two in selling lies, especially to himself.

“And what about the alterations department?” she asked when he’d finished the last of his sales pitch. “What will you use it for?”

“Arras needs strong leaders to establish order—” he began.

Lucy laughed at him.“The same leaders in perpetuity? That’s what those plans said. You called these alterations ‘the proverbial fountain of youth.’ You want to live forever. You don’t care about saving anyone but yourself.”

“It’s fortunate for you that the alterations department exists.” Patton stood and moved toward the

door.

“And why is that? Are you going to kill me like you killed Dr. Lucas?”

She spit the question at him, anger boiling over inside her. It was impossible to hide it.

“Alterations have another use, Miss Price. They can alter memories. Our tests so far have had varying success rates, but I’m sure our boys only need more practice.” Patton’s lips curved into a thin smile that didn’t reach his near-black eyes.

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise. Prepare yourself, Miss Price. You’ve been chosen to help us build the new world,” he said.

“And if I won’t?”

“You will, because after my boys are done with you, you won’t remember this conversation. You won’t even be Lucy Price anymore. Enjoy tonight.

Tomorrow will be a whole new world.”

And with that he flipped a switch, washing away the room in a torrent of light and screams.